Wholeness
Luke 4:14-21
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Dag Hammarskjold was delivering an address at Cambridge in 1960 when he said, "The world is today as never before split into two camps, each of which understands the other as the embodiment of falsehood and itself the embodiment of truth." The Secretary General of the United Nations was talking about the split between East and West: communism and capitalism which has characterized international relations since the end of the Second World War. I would submit, however, that Hammarskjold was really talking about a fundamental reality of the human situation which simply expresses itself in the political confrontation between communism and capitalism in our day. He - and I am sure he understood it this way - was touching a truth about humanity. There is a need, apparently, in the human animal to split everything into two camps; right and wrong: ours and theirs. We have a dismal record, from the very beginning, of excluding and sometimes eliminating those who are not with us, who do not define the truth as we do. The terrible tragedy of Northern Ireland is bound up in that observation. In Leon Uris' bestseller, Trinity, the conflict is described in terms that are far more profound than Catholic - Protesant animosity. And in a recent Harper's Magazine article on why the prospects for peace in Ireland are very slim the author observes that strong partisans on both sides, are not at all interested in resolving the conflict. It is easier, it seems, to die than to admit that there may be some truth in one's opponents' position.

I suppose I will never grow accustomed to the way that comes to the surface during an American election, not - by the way - as a result of the politicians themselves. They know that conflict and compromise are the stuff of politics and that the very genius of this democracy is the existence of two parties which means that neither is all right nor all wrong. My surprise at the way voters need to believe that all truth is on one side and all error on the other comes, I suppose, from my father: a total partisan, who felt that the old adage about the Presbyterian Church being the Republican Party at Prayer was a compliment, not a criticism, but who insisted that Presidents be referred to as President Roosevelt, President Truman - not because he admired them, which he most certainly did not, but because they were President. I continue to be surprised when partisanship implies that my candidate, my party, is all right and yours all wrong.

That human need - to own the whole truth - is as old as humanity. And it appears in the Bible particularly in the life and ministry of our Lord Jesus Christ. The trouble with Jesus was that He would not be anyone's man but His own. Not that people didn't try. His contemporaries were forever pushing Him to take positions which would align Him with their corner on the truth. Once they gave Him a coin with the head of Caesar on it and asked a question designed to force Him into supporting the loyalists or the revolutionaries. "Render unto Caesar what is Caesar's, and render unto God what is God's," was His response. That is to say, final truth will not be monopolized by either of your positions.

In the Gospel Lesson this morning, our Lord was in Nazareth - His home town. He read some very stirring words from the Prophet Isaiah: "The spirit of the Lord is upon me - He has anointed me to preach good news to the poor - to proclaim release to the captives and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed." The people were pleased with His selection of texts, but what He said next nearly got Him killed: "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing." The people of Nazareth already knew the truth, were comfortable with the truth: this man was going to do it His way and they didn't like it.

On another occasion He was asked what a man must do to be saved. He did not give one answer - but two: two different answers: "Love God - and your neighbor." Truth is not in either domain alone but in the synthesis of the two.

That particular incident prompts Elton Trueblood to observe: "Modest as the word appears to be, one of the greatest of all Christian terms is the word 'and'." (The New Man For Our Time, p.29). Time and time again Jesus took two opposing points of view and demonstrated that the truth lies somewhere between them or in combination of the two. He demonstrated something which could be called "wholeness", and the more I think about - and observe its absence - the more I am convinced that it is one of the key concepts in the New Testament. Wholeness - the stubborn refusal to be pushed into a position which excludes the insights of another position: the openness and fairness and even - handedness that is able to leave predetermined positions behind and deal with the real issues.

We need that as a nation. We are facing a very critical time: a time in which we must decide how we will deal with the crisis in energy, for instance. And we will not be helped by the divisiveness that has characterized the last decade. We are divided across racial and economic lines: across the now infamous generation gap. Out dividedness was amplified by the tragedies of Watergate and Vietnam during which political opponents became enemies to be discredited, and those who dissented from national policy were called traitors. Gerald Ford did a great deal to erase that dangerous split from among us. It was a major accomplishment. In his farewell State of the Union address he spoke very movingly about the way opponents help one another to find the truth by invoking the names of colleagues from both parties. We need his spirit in the days ahead. President Carter makes a similar appeal. Truth is not private property. Right and good will be affirmed when people of good will stand close together, even in disagreement. I confess that I have been moved by the way both of them have held up the exciting model of "wholeness" since the November election. How remarkable - and how good - that the biggest applause on innauguration day was prompted by the new President thanking the retiring President!

The Church, in many ways, reflects the culture. There has always been a divided house in Christendom: the existence of Protestantism expresses it. We have argued about a lot of things. But currently a curious phenomenon is occurring. Major denominations have moved ever closer together so that the theological differences between say, Presbyterian, Methodist, and the United Church of Christ are at best negligible. Common ground for conversation and sharing has been found between Protestants and Roman Catholics in a manner unheard of since the Reformation. But at the same time very serious divisions have opened within each communion. Denominational differences have become party divisions within each denomination and all the way down to each local congregation. And the substance of the conflict has to do with the very nature of the Church. The two camps may be called Pietist and Activist. Both use our Gospel Lesson this morning to fortify their respective positions.

Trueblood defines them as follows: "an activist is a person who holds that an attack on entrenched social ills is the only part of the Christian life worth considering. The characteristic activist pickets, organizes, marches, signs petitions and engages in protests. A pietist, on the other hand, emphasizes the life of prayer, worship, devotion and personal evangelism...he is concerned with the salvation of his own soul...and his own peace of mind." (Ibid, p.17).

That is certainly descriptive of the situation in the Presbyterian family in the past decade. Both parties have their own leaders, their own press, their own organizations. There is a sizable group of people in our denomination which wants the Church to devote its full resources to the cause of human development, equal justice and human liberation. There is another equally sizeable block that wants the Church to get off of the streets and out of the courts and confine itself to dealing with the souls of individual men and women. That is the issue which is dividing our Church - and whenever joined, it is expressed in ultimate, exclusive and belligerent terms.

The New York Times Magazine just last week devoted its cover article to that issue and the partisans now fighting it out in the American Roman Catholic Church. Two major power blocks have emerged: the liberals who want to push the Church more radically into the world and the conservatives who resist change and want the Church to retain its traditions.

Where are you on this issue? Is our primary mission as a Church to tell people about God's love so that they experience salvation? Or is it to exert pressure on political structures so that the hungry are fed and the oppressed liberated? I have come to believe that it cannot be either/or: the primary mission of the Church is to do both. I have come to believe that there is nothing so sterile as the social activist position which is not rooted in a personal sensitivity to the love of God in Jesus Christ for the individual. I don't think it is enough simply to give a cup of cold water. We must know and be able to tell the reason why. I don't think it enough to be concerned about justice, liberation, poverty, health as Christians: we need the whole input of God's love for individuals.

Likewise I think there is nothing emptier than the zealous evangelism that talks about salvation as if it were a private transaction between God and the individual. George Buttrick once said: "If religion does not begin with the individual it never begins; but if it ends with the individual it ends." "I found it" may be a catchy phrase to describe salvation, but it's only half the truth. It needs another phrase - "and in finding it found also my brothers and sisters whom God calls me to love and serve."

I find a synthesis - a wholeness - in the Bible. The scriptures are both warmly evangelical and socially active. Jesus said that He had come to preach good news to the poor, give sight to the blind and liberate the prisoners; a kind of quintessence of the social Gospel. But in the same Gospel we hear Him tell the story of one lost sheep, and the shepherd who will not rest until it is found and safely in the fold; the epitome of the warmly,individual evangelical emphasis. It is a tragic adulteration of the Gospel when the Christian religion comes down on one side, to the exclusion of the other.

As I thought about some of the people who have discovered and expressed this wholeness of the Gospel Albert Schweitzer came to mind: the genius who valued both social change in health service, but also individual devotion. Or John Woolman, an 18th century Quaker whose personal piety led him to a position opposing slavery. Or I thought about Martin Luther King, Jr. who combined social passion with winsomely, humble piety. Or Dietrich Bonhoeffer, so committed to the struggle against evil in the world that he cast his lot with the saboteurs who attempted to assassinate Adolph Hitler, yet who in his Letters and Papers from Prison exhibited an almost childlike faith in God's providential goodness.

It is that synthesis: that wholeness that the contemporary Church needs to regain. It is our genius. It is what we have to offer our society. We are the arena in which people can disagree yet belong to one another. We are the place where openness to new ideas must be practiced and demonstrated. Just as Jesus Christ is God's model of what it means to be human, so the Church is intended to be His model of what human beings look like in relationship. But we - in the Church - must make the decision somewhere along the line to let it happen in our midst; to climb down from our rigid positions to see each other and to listen for the truth we have to offer each other.

Wholeness - it has to do with our culture, our nation, our Church. And it has to do with us, personally, individually. I would guess that there are very few people who do not feel fragmented, pulled apart, pushed in ten different directions by the tensions of modern life. I would guess that there are few of us who have not felt, at times, the absolute necessity of hiding behind a rigid position because it was too painful to remain open. "The revolutionary and truly contemporary message," Elton Trueblood writes, "is that choice is not always required, the pressures of the age notwithstanding. It is a mistake, for example, to suppose that we must choose between being liberals and being conservatives inasmuch as every sound person is something of both. Everyone who is intellectually and spiritually alive is a liberal, in the sense that he is open to truth from any quarter welcoming any evidence without prejudgment. Similarly, each person who thinks with any care is a conservative partly because he is unwilling to waste whatever has proved itself in the long experience of history, and partly because he knows that the most recent emphasis is not automatically the most wise." (Ibid, p.30).

Our God is one who cares about justice in the structures of society. To conclude that He does not care about things like racial discrimination, equal opportunity, is simply to be less than honest with the Bible. It is to miss entirely, for instance, the words that His son Jesus said in Nazareth. But He is also a God who cares about individuals apart from society; a God like a shepherd; a God who is compassionate and merciful and kind. Neither of those emphases fully describes **Him**. Each needs the other in order to be complete.

So - He calls us to that same wholeness. We need to be the kind of people who can confront one another vigorously in the political arena, and then pray together about it. We need to cultivate the angry arousal at the injustices in society, but also the humble arousal at the wonder of God's personal love. We need to be concerned about the victims of political oppression far more than we have in the past, but also about the person who does not know the joy of God's salvation. We need to learn how to disagree without disliking; and to be honest with one another but also patient and considerate and loving.

That's what wholeness is. That's what God intends His people to be. And that is what should be evident in the life of the Church. Our culture desperately needs it: our own community needs an institution which is whole enough to include people who disagree on important issues, but honestly extend to one another the right hand of Christian Fellowship. In the final analysis you and I need the wholeness demonstrated by Jesus Christ and offered in His Gospel. None of us stands alone - at least for very long: no one of us really has a corner on the truth, as much as we wish we did; everyone of us needs the benefit of open communication with someone whose views we don't like.

It can happen here - if we allow it and will it. Jesus Christ is the model.

Amen.